



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

A METHOD OF GRADING ENGLISH COMPOSITION

JAMES ROUTH
Tulane University of Louisiana

Grading themes for classes in composition has been a vexatious problem. In other subjects it is possible to grade with fair accuracy by allotting to each question on a quiz so much per cent, or by taking off so much for every error of fact in an essay. But to estimate the literary value of a student's style is a different matter. In practical business such work is sized up by a purely empirical process. If the essay, or story, gets published, is well received, and editors and publishers ask for other articles by the same writer, we have proof, by a sure test, not indeed of the absolute excellence of the work, but of its availability for its market. Similarly the speech that gets the speaker elected to office, or gets his bill passed, has been graded by a sure and final test, so far as adaptation of the work to an end is concerned. But how is the teacher to discover the real value of a student's work, when there are no facilities for trying it on the public.

In the modern school the weekly or monthly school paper and the public or semi-public debate offer tests of this character; but the judges of such work are not likely to be of discriminating taste. Nor can such tests be applied to any but a few of the pupils. The grading of themes comes back generally to the personal opinion of the teacher, and is largely a matter of individual impression or intuition.

And the individual impression, even of a good teacher, may be inadequate. Beyond the correcting of ordinary errors, such as errors of grammar, spelling, and the like, lies the evaluation of the psychological effect the pupil's style will have on a reader or hearer. And such evaluation is beyond the teacher who has not the skill or the equipment of the psychologist, or the time to use them if he had them.

The objection that has been raised to all exact grading of composition—that it makes the student work for grades or prizes as things

valuable in themselves—does not concern us here. Whether grades be useful or not for teaching, they are necessary for an accurate sizing up of the pupil. And the teacher who wishes to know the value of each pupil, and who may wish later to recommend him to some employer, must be able to size him up accurately. How is it to be done? When the teacher stakes his own reputation as a judge, and testifies that a writer is so much per cent efficient, what is the estimate worth? Will the estimate be confirmed by that of the business man, lawyer, newspaper man, or other person who may employ the student to do some sort of writing for him?

In suggesting the following scheme for grading composition, I do not propose that it be taken as a panacea. The scheme is an outline, but the fundamental principles have been tried, in one form or another, in many college classes, with results more satisfactory than any attained by the older systems of grading.

The scheme not only covers the grading of the actual piece of writing, but also attempts a general evaluation of the pupil as a business man or a professional man; that is, an evaluation of his worth as a writer with respect to his reliability and intelligence, as well as to his command of the technique of writing. At first glance this may seem too comprehensive, but an inspection of the following table of the qualities to be graded will show nothing strange to the teacher of composition, who knows that moral qualities—say, for example, punctuality in getting work done—often count as heavily as the intrinsic excellence of the work itself. The qualities of the pupil which are suggested for grading, in this preliminary outline, may be divided into four groups:

- I. *Command of Technique*; that is, of the machinery of composition, which includes proficiency in—
 - a) Grammar.
 - b) Spelling.
 - c) Punctuation.
 - d) Vocabulary.
 - e) Textbook Theory of Composition.
- II. *Habits of Thought*, which include clearness and accuracy in—
 - a) Sentences.
 - b) Idioms.
 - c) The Making of Outlines.

III. *Personal Character*, as shown in—

- a) Punctuality.
- b) Reliability.
- c) Initiative and Enterprise.

IV. *General Intelligence*.

The first two groups plainly deal with acquired information and consequently with the education, in a narrow sense, of the pupil. The second two groups deal with native or inborn qualities of the pupil. But all enter into a general estimate of the man's worth as a practical writer, the estimate that the business man wishes when he contemplates employing him.

Item *e*), in group I, described as Textbook Theory of Composition, is intended to cover all that miscellany of technical information treated in the elementary textbook on rhetoric, exclusive of such points as are covered by some other heading in this table, vocabulary, for instance.

In group II, sentences, idioms, and outlines—which are also covered in group I—are to be included only in so far as they indicate a student's habits of thought. For example, an ununified sentence may indicate a discursive type of mind; a sentence involving grammatical inconsistency, a hazy or befogged mind; and a good outline, a logical grasp of the subject as a whole, that is, a habit of mind.

In group III, the heading Reliability covers what we may call the student's temperamental truthfulness. Does he state what he knows with habitual accuracy and stop when he comes to what he does not know, or does he guess at things? Does he ever fake? In Germany, by the way, it is said that every time a schoolboy tells a lie it is recorded against him, not for discipline, but for future reference when he shall have become a man.

Again, has he initiative and enterprise? Does he surmount difficulties or lie down before them? For example, when he is sent to get a news story for his school paper and finds that the first three men he sees know nothing about it, does he come back empty-handed? Is he addicted to excuses? Or does he have the habit of succeeding?

The last heading of our table is obviously incommensurable, but a fair estimate can usually be made by the teacher, and such

an estimate cannot be omitted, even though it be less easily verified than the other elements.

Now for the calculation of the grades. Suppose that we value each of these larger groups at 25 per cent of the whole. This may not be the best proportioning, but it will answer for our preliminary outline of the method. We will also provide that a pupil who fails to pass in any group shall be given for that group not a certain portion or percentage of the 25 per cent, but 0. Suppose then we make 80 the passing grade for the whole. Then a student who fails in any one group fails on the whole subject, an entirely reasonable arrangement. At the same time he may, without actually failing, be weak in some one group, say personal character, and yet be passable, though not excellent, as a practical writer. He may, for example, even be a good newspaper writer.

The next point is, how much of the 25 per cent devoted to each group is to be assigned to each of the smaller constituents of the group? Here the qualities must be considered as of differing value. For example, bad punctuation should certainly not be penalized as heavily as bad grammar, or good spelling valued as highly as a large vocabulary.

Suppose then that group I to pass must be 80 per cent correct. Grammar should count for at least 25 per cent, so that a failure in grammar, graded as a failure at 0, will mean failure in the group and hence failure in the whole subject. Punctuation, on the other hand, might be graded at say 15 per cent. The pupil then might fail on punctuation, and yet have a chance to pass on his English, if everything else be in good order, an arrangement obviously reasonable, even though it may not postulate the ideal perfection of the composition teacher's dreams.

The other system of grading, which attempts an individual evaluation of the various elements, is that which simply assigns so much per cent to each element, then adds up the total. But this system simply does not work with any approach to accuracy. Suppose, for example, that each of our four groups be valued at 25 per cent, and each of the five elements of group I at 5 per cent out of that 25. The student may get 0 on grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and textbook theory, but if he be perfect on everything

else, he will get 80 per cent and pass. Usually the failing of this system of grading is not so crude as that, but it is easy to see the weakness of any attempt to have each topic count for a fixed percentage of the total. This difficulty is obviated by the newer system.

In practice, the new system would not have to be applied in its entirety to every theme or quiz. The average punctuality, for example, might be sized up once in two or three months, by reference to the number of papers handed in late with or without feeble excuses. The habit of logical thought shown in the making of outlines could probably be determined once for all during the few weeks devoted by the class to the study of outlines.

The details of the system can be worked out only by experiment. But this outline is sufficient to show that the whole system of grading English papers can be made at once scientific and practical, and that the personal equation of the teacher can be largely eliminated from the evaluation of work, and that it can be done without any risk of making the teaching mechanical, or of sacrificing in the slightest the valuable personal element in the pedagogical part of the work.